One God and The One God

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Abstract

This paper aims to determine whether strict monotheism began in Ancient Israel or in neighboring cultures in the period described within the books of the Tanakh. I conclude that strict monotheism began after the period of the Babylonian exile; however, there are possible precursors to this development sparsely throughout Israelite history that have ties with the Israelites’ neighbors.

By examining various passages from the Hebrew Bible, books on the history of the Tanakh and the Near East, as well as historical and archeological studies published on the subject and investigations conducted in the area, I aim to establish the definition of strict monotheism in the eyes of the people who lived in the Near East at the time and determine whether it differs from the definition of monotheism that we have today.

I will question the time at which monotheism became the staple of Israelite religion and observe the possible external influences that could have facilitated the process of the establishment of the One God. In order to do this, I will look at two of the biggest events in Israelite history: The Exodus and the Babylonian exile and the possible connections they may have with the monotheistic religion of Israel.

From my analysis, I will conclude that though the development of monotheism as a centerpiece of Israelite religion does have similarities with the phenomenon in other regions in the Near East, it is most likely to have been formed in the shape it is today after the exile in Babylon due to the consolidation and reclamation of faith in Yahweh.
I will also conclude that the definition of the term, monotheism, has evolved throughout the ages and does not constitute the same set of beliefs over the entire time period covered in this paper.

Nowadays, Jews and Christians all over the world are unwavering in their conviction that their God is One. The God they venerate, the God they try to grasp is One – the One, in fact. However, most believers do not know of the possible origins of their One God, and how He came to be.

In reality, human development has progressed from animism to polytheism to strict monotheism throughout centuries. This is one of the measuring scales of civilizational development according to history: people have gone from worshiping the spirits of nature to more or less concrete gods to one God. This has happened throughout the entire world, and civilizational development has arguably been strongest and fastest in the Near East. Therefore, it should not be surprising that the One God has not always been just one. More and more evidence suggests that YHWH, “I Am Who I Am” (Exodus 3:14 New Revised Standard Version), has indeed at some point been one of I Am, one of many. It is important to draw this distinction as it determines the very basis of monotheism as we understand it today – by defining monotheism in the terms that defined it in the days of old.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines monotheism as a “doctrine or belief that there is but one God” (Merriam-Webster.com). This strict monotheism is what Abrahamic religions follow nowadays (even though Christians do believe in trinitarianism, which is not preventative of their monotheism); however, that was not always the case. The difference between “there is one God” and “there can be no other Gods” is subtle yet crucial to studying the history of monotheistic development in the Near East.
First, to examine the origins of Yahwism as a religion in itself. If we are to examine the unpopular theory of the Exodus having happened in the 15th century BCE (which stems solely from the reading of the Book of Kings, particularly Kings 6:1, and is based on the date of the inauguration of the First Temple by Solomon – 480 years after the Exodus), we are looking at the theory of liberation happening after the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaton, who reigned around 1351-1334 BCE (Beckerath, 1997), a notoriously monotheistic Pharaoh in a very polytheistic and rich culture of Ancient Egypt. Akhenaton introduced the exclusive worship of Aton, the Sun Disk god, and denied the worship of all other deities that had been the basis of Egyptian belief for centuries before (and centuries after, as well, as Akhenaton’s death brought about a revival of polytheistic Egypt by his son, Tutankhaten-self-renamed-Tutankhamen). The cuneiform tablets at Tell el-Amarna (Figure 1, see Appendix) have shown that Akhenaten had been in touch with petty monarchs in Canaan; and Amarna religion can be viewed as “a logical culmination… understood the one god as the generative source of all gods, in the same way that a parent generates his or her children” (Allen, 1999).

Could Akhenaton’s introduction of monotheism have been a launch pad for Israelite monotheism as well? There is no concrete evidence to this; however, it is very typical of smaller peoples living within larger, dominant cultures to absorb and embrace individual aspects of that culture. Thus, I cannot reject nor accept the proposal that Akhenaton’s brief venture into monotheism could have spurred on monotheistic ideas in the liberated people of Israel.

Conversely, these dates have hardly any archeological evidence to support them; according to John Oakes, Ph.D., it is more likely that the Israelites influenced Akhenaten since they had probably already left Egypt by the time of his reform, and his father or grandfather would have been the one to experience the wrath of Yahweh in the
Exodus, which would have impacted the Pharaoh’s religious views. In addition, it is “far easier to believe a single person (Akhenaten) could have been influence by a whole people (the Israelites).” Oakes also claims that the relative historical stability of Israelite culture and religion would make it unlikely that they “would have been so fickle as to have accepted monotheism from a single person in a short time” (Oakes, 2012).

On a different side of the argument, we cannot say for certain that the Israelites were fully monotheistic at the time of the Exodus. In the passage preceding Aaron’s creation of the golden calf – which may or may not have been a representation of the earlier pagan gods in the Israelite religion, and which is certainly consonant with the belief in El, a Northwestern Semitic deity in Canaan (Matthews, 2004), “[the people] gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us…” (Exodus 32:1). Gods, plural. This makes the connection between Egyptian and Israelite monotheism even more fragile – at least before the end of the Exodus itself. What I can conclude from the history of the Exodus, then, is that it was a stepping stone towards an abstract idea of One God; however, people are stubborn creatures and are hesitant to let go of their traditions, particularly when it comes to religious thinking. One cannot abandon what they have thought to be true for years immediately. It is a process that has a beginning, but its ending is very far off from the starting point.

My second matter of interest was Zoroastrianism, a religion that had the same source as the religion of the Vedic Aryans (Noss, 1964, 464, as cited by Applegate, 2000). Sometime around 2000 BCE, Indo-Europeans parted ways at the Caspian Sea and one group went to India while the other took to what is now part of modern Iran. The religion was founded by the prophet Zarathustra and called for the belief in a single deity, Ahura Mazda. Not only that, the religion was dualistic in the sense that Ahura Mazda seemed to be at constant war with an evil force, and Zoroastrians believed in an
end of the world which would culminate in the victory of good. Ahura Mazda has at least seventy-four names in Zoroastrian literature, all of which point to him being omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and the creator of all being. If this does not sound familiar, then perhaps, Ahura Mazda’s revelation to Zarathustra will: he told the prophet that his name was “I Am” (Hume, 1995, 38, as cited by Applegate, 2000). However, though there are many staggering parallels between the two conceptions of god, “a study of scholars such as Mills, Moulton, Zaehner, Masani, Noss, Hume, and Duchesne-Guillemin has turned up little if any evidence of Persian influence on the Jewish doctrine of God” (Applegate, 2000). Does this mean that Zoroastrian Ahura Mazda has nothing to do with Yahweh? Perhaps not; however, I cannot deny the fact that Zoroastrian beliefs were very progressive compared to its contemporaries in the region.

What happens later in Israelite history is then key to the understanding of why this religion may have played a part in the creation of the Yahwist Israelite religion that worships one God only.

Why is Zoroastrianism and its possible influence on Judaism important? Though scholars are in disagreement regarding how much Persian culture influenced Judaism during the Babylonian Exile (ca. 597-532 BCE), it seems more than a coincidence to me that the two cultures had interacted at a certain time (which, for the Israelites, was a significant moment in the development of their faith after the ruination of the First Temple), and that there are so many parallels between the two.

I believe that it was during the Babylonian exile that Judaism had finally solidified its monotheistic doctrine. During the exile, there was a serious religious crisis present due to Yahweh’s “loss” against the Babylonian gods. In Jeremiah, however, Ezekiel says the following: “and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust… just what I did to
Shiloh” (Jeremiah 7:13-14). Thus, the destruction of the First Temple is propagated as a display of Yahweh’s power instead of powerlessness, divine action against the rebellious people who committed all sorts of heinous sins within the temple (Andersen, 1986, p. 439) – and this notion held in spite of the hardships the Israelite faith was facing at the time. In 2 Isaiah, an anonymous prophet states, “all who make idols are nothing, and all the things they delight in do not profit” (Isaiah 44:9), meaning the Babylonian idols that persevered in the local religion.

Overall, I believe that the Babylonian exile was arguably beneficial to the development of Jewish monotheism as a concept: not only did it solidify the faith the people had in Yahweh as their supreme and omnipotent god, not only did the exile serve as proof of the fact that Yahweh was so great that He did not need to be tied to a temple, he did not require a throne or a House. Indeed, during the exile, the people came to see that their worship of Yahweh could be conducted in any place and circumstance; moreover, it is suggested that the synagogue (Greek for “gathering together”) may have originated during the exile – meaning that the Jews came together to experience their God through means other than localized, tied-down worship – choosing reverent prayer instead. (Andersen, 1986, p. 449).

During the later period of the Babylonian exile, the Israelites were actually left in peace with their beliefs. In 549 BCE, the Persians led by Cyrus the Great of the Achaemenian dynasty overthrew the Median court and founded the first Persian Empire. The Achaemenian kings were pious Zoroastrians, and Cyrus the Great was relatively liberal compared to his predecessors in Babylon – he did not attempt to impose Zoroastrianism on the people who lived under his rule. Later, Cyrus himself allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem (“The Achaemenian”).
Have the Israelites always been monotheistic? Have they all turned monotheistic right after the exile? I argue that such an evolution in understanding of the concept cannot occur all at once. Indeed, much textual and archeological evidence is to the contrary. According to scholar Ephraim Stern, “some Israelites believed that Yahweh had a female consort... invoked the divinity [Yahweh] with the help of images, particularly figurines. I call this Israelite religion pagan Yahwism” (Stern, 2001). The matter of the female consort is particularly interesting to monotheism studies, as it presents quite a bit of evidence: texts and material objects alike. It also contradicts the uniconic nature of Israelite faith; at least, in its earliest stages of development. An analysis of a house shrine found in antiquities collector Shlomo Moussaieff’s possession (Figure 2, see Appendix) supports the idea of ordinary ancient Israelites (as opposed to the priestly elite) to have identified a consort for Yahweh called Asherah. Though the origin of this collection may be questionable, it has been investigated by scholars and written about in the *Biblical Archeology Review*. In his article, Dever states that the very fact that the Bible condemned the cult of Asherah demonstrated proof of their existence and their perception as a threat to monotheism (2008). The shrine is said to have come from northern Palestine, either east or west of the Jordan river, and dates back to approximately the 10-9th c. BCE (Shanks, 2005), and it depicts two nude female figurines, who are “most surely” deities. Shanks claims that the deity may be a fertility goddess, and considers Asherah to be the most probable candidate due to her association with the recumbent lion which is traditionally considered Asherah’s animal (2005).

The most prominent textual evidence towards the existence of Asherah are the inscriptions found in Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom (Figure 3, see Appendix) containing the phrase “Yahweh and his Asherah” (Dever, 2005). The question still
stands to as to the power of Asherah within the cult of Yahweh – did she have equal standing with Him or not? Did they split responsibilities? Or was she simply a relic of the past that the people were reluctant to let go of? After studying multiple figurines and inscriptions that deal with the “divine couple,” some of which depicted Yahweh or, conversely, El, on horseback as a warrior, Stern concluded that “until the Babylonian destruction of Judah and the end of the Israelite monarchy in 586 BCE, pagan Yahwism was common even in Jerusalem” (2001).

A possible Iron I composition (1200-1000 BCE) – with dating based on archaic Hebrew poetry typologies – found in northern Sinai (Figure 4, see appendix), at Kuntillet Ajrud on the wall of a building dating back to the 9th c. BCE, a poem written in the Hebrew language but using the Phoenician script begins with the words “When El shone forth…” and proceeds to “When Baal [arose] on the day of battle…” McCarter believes these words, “the day of battle” to be reminiscent of the biblical concept of the “day of Yahweh,” when the God of Israel would arise and defeat his enemies. The scholar claims that “Ba’al,” at the time, was an acceptable epithet for ‘lord’ and that this depiction of Yahweh as a warrior speaks a lot not only to the anthropomorphic portrayal of Yahweh which could stem from a pagan, iconic past; but also the the fact that Yahweh seems to have a special geographical fondness for the territory: specifically, the south and east of historical Israel and Judah (1991).

If we are to put Asherah aside and dismiss her as a relic of the past, we can then turn towards the Bible itself for further proof of liberal monotheism in early Israelite faith. This evolution can be traced throughout the Bible itself: in Exodus 20, God tells Moses “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). However, it is not explicitly stated that there are indeed no other gods, simply that the people of this God are not to engage in worshipping others.
The same can be seen in the Book of Micah: “for all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever” (Micah 4:5). Once again, I believe the passage does not deny the existence of other gods, simply stating that the Israelites walked with their own.

Conversely, in later books of the Bible, this statement changes drastically – for example, “Therefore you are great, O LORD God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears.” (2 Samuel 7:22), there is a clear indication that the change to strict monotheism had occurred – in the Scripture, at least. When analyzing this change, it is important to keep in mind that the Exodus texts were written earlier than those of the Deuteronomistic History, therefore this depicts an evolution, rather than a regression, of monotheistic views. Though the book of Samuel does not clearly indicate when it had been written, it refers to Israel and Judah as distinct kingdoms (e.g., 1 Samuel 11:8, 17:52), and notes that Ziklag belonged “to the kings of Judah to this day” (1 Samuel 27:6), therefore setting the date at after Solomon’s death – theoretically, it was written either before the exile or during it (if we are to consider the Former Prophets as a single unit) (“Second Samuel,” 2010).

What did I conclude from the evidence presented above? For one, I can state with relative surety that the assumed influence of the Egyptian monotheistic episode during Akhenaton’s rule cannot be taken as fact due to the discrepancies in dating, and certain social factors that may or may not have influenced the development of believe in one God in both cultures. While the Exodus was a step towards monotheism in Judaism, we cannot assume that it was solely responsible for the Israelites’ beliefs narrowing down to Yahwist worship.
As to the Babylonian exile, it must have been a more likely factor in support of Jewish monotheism, not only due to the somewhat paradoxical solidification of faith through the destruction of the First Temple, but also due to the liberal policies of Cyrus the Great later, throughout the period of Persian rule that brought about the return of the Israelite people to their homeland. It is my opinion that this particular period of Israelite history – though at times traumatic and harrowing – was an exercise in faith for the people of the LORD, and served to solidify and in some ways narrow the scope of their faith; paradoxically, by expanding it: from the Temple to the entire world. The Israelites not only managed to recuperate but also to reorganize their faith – and by doing that, they created a universal community of belief that still stands strong today. Synagogues are not viewed as universal temples; rather, they are a place for prayer and reflection. Though the Temple of Jerusalem – what is left of it – is still considered a revered place and accumulates massive numbers of pilgrims annually, the Israelite faith does not require worship in it necessarily.

Does this mean that monotheism is the proverbial good that fought and won against the metaphorical evil of polytheism and paganism? I do not believe so. I strongly believe that it is a necessary step in evolution of a belief system – for all intents and purposes, believing in one thing is always easier than believing in many. The LORD of Israel is great because of His benevolence, His omnipotence, His omnipresence. He is All, the All that had once included many deities, both revered and feared.

We must always remember that polytheism was an inevitable phenomenon in human development, stemming from animism in the very early stages of civilization. While it is true that today we consider monotheism a universal concept (at least in the context of Christian and Jewish faith, as well as that of Islam), we cannot be expected to
grasp the concept of monotheism as the earlier Near Eastern societies had done back in their day. We have to keep this in mind when reading the Bible, at least those passages in which it is not explicitly stated that the belief at the time was in one God and one God only.
References


http://bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/zoroastrian/history/persia_1.shtml.

Appendix

Figure 1


Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4